When language attitudes impede proposed changes in language policy:  
the bidialectal setting of Cyprus

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Abstract

The use of non-standard languages in education remains until today a controversial issue. Some researchers argue that children should be given the right to use and practice in school the language they speak at home and others declare that the mother tongue may not be desirable for primary education mainly for reasons of equality, empowerment and employment opportunities. Primary education in Cyprus is conducted in Standard Modern Greek and not in the Greek Cypriot dialect, the children’s mother tongue. This paper investigates the role language attitudes can play in accepting proposed changes in language policy.

Keywords: dialects, non-standard languages, mother-tongue education, language policy, language attitudes, Cyprus

1. Introduction

For many years researchers from various backgrounds (linguists, educators, language planners, and others) have been involved in the contentious issue of dialect education, which has aroused a great deal of discussion worldwide (for a comprehensive review see Sonano 1986; Cheshire et al. 1989; McKay & Hornberger 1996; Hollingsworth 1997; Driessen & Withagen 1999). In the debate on what language should be used in primary education, there are those who claim that all children must be given the opportunity to receive education in the language they speak at home whether this language is a standard one or a local variety. In other words, advocates of mother-tongue education (a) believe that standard and non-standard varieties are equal, (b) argue that children who bring to school a language other than a standard should be educated in their native language and (c) insist that instruction in the mother tongue will produce individuals with a positive self-image and self-confidence and without cultural disorientation. On the other hand, there are those who are not in favor of mother-tongue education and who present various arguments in support of their own views.

2. Arguments in favor of mother-tongue education

Mother-tongue education for all children has been one of the major aims of the Language Rights Movement (see 1951 UNESCO resolution). Many researchers would uphold UNESCO’s position for advocating the use of the mother tongue as the language through which children can acquire basic knowledge. Also, those who promote mother-tongue education would even go further and argue that, in addition to giving children the right to use and practise their language, we should also provide them with opportunities to develop their own identity and cultural heritage embodied in their
language. Since children’s cultural identity is mostly formed and developed at school, children will have a deeper sense of belonging to that culture.

James (1996) reviews a number of studies (Kharma & Hajjaj 1989; Swain 1996, among others) that clearly show evidence in favor of mother-tongue education. Based on the results of these studies and on relevant theoretical findings, James (1996) presents five arguments supporting the use of the mother tongue in school. First, it ensures academic progress in the content areas of the curriculum. In other words, it is believed that the mother tongue is the best way to introduce literacy skills to a learner. Second, it ensures continued cognitive development that is essential to subsequent language development. Third, it promotes a positive self-image. When children recognize that their own specific language and culture have value it helps them develop a positive self-image for themselves, and that in turn exerts a constructive effect on their motivation, attitudes and ultimately on their achievement in school. Fourth, it facilitates learning of a second language. Finally, the use of the mother tongue minimizes culture shock especially where there is a significant difference between the native and the ‘other’ culture. Thus, James’ arguments focus on the enhancement of cognitive development, on fostering literacy in the most effective way, on developing a positive self-image, and on appreciation of one’s cultural heritage.

3. Arguments questioning mother-tongue education

Many researchers (Di Pietro 1973; Kroch 1978; Skutnabb-Kangas 1984; Phillipson 1992; Gupta 1994, 1997, among others) believe that in some language situations primary education in the mother tongue may not be desirable for many reasons. Gupta’s (1994, 1997) arguments against the use of mother tongue in certain cases are based on issues of empowerment for groups and individuals. The empowerment of the people, Gupta (1997) believes, should be more important than the development of one’s mother tongue, and even the preservation of a language. Also, according to Gupta (1997), in cases where the mother tongue is not the official language of the state, problems would arise if the mother tongue were the language of instruction in schools. For example, such a situation creates difficulties for the individual who, after completing schooling in the mother tongue is expected to convert to using a language that is less familiar and possibly threatening. Thus, the individual has limited opportunities in the professional, socio-political and economic fields that require competence in the official language of the state.

4. The Cyprus sociolinguistic and educational setting

The aforementioned arguments in favor of or against mother-tongue education are, to some extent, applicable to the Cyprus context. Before presenting the findings of the current study, we need, first, to present the current sociolinguistic setting and, second, to examine the present language policy. The current sociolinguistic setting can be best characterized as bidialectal rather than diglossic. In Cyprus, there is no distinction between a high (H) and low (L) variety used side by side, or between a classical and a colloquial form of Greek. The situation is rather bidialectal since Greek Cypriots, in general, use the dialect throughout their daily activities but switch to Standard Modern Greek (SMG) in certain situations (Papapavlou 1998, 2001; Papapavlou & Pavlou, 1998).

Primary education in Cyprus is conducted in SMG and not in the Greek Cypriot Dialect (GCD), the language variety children use at home and bring to school, that is,
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their mother tongue. It is important to emphasize that although SMG may not be considered as a ‘foreign’ language for Cypriot children, it is however a code that (a) is not actively used before entering school and (b) is not felt to be their own natural way of communicating with each other or with their parents. In other words, for Cypriot children, SMG is recognized as the language that ‘other’ Greeks use (Ioannidou 2002; Papapavlou 2004; Pavlou & Papapavlou 2004).

The language-in-education policy in Cyprus has never been clearly articulated and there is no official declaration or decree issued by the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) that spells out this policy. Since such a policy is not overtly stated, the role and use of the GCD in education, to a large degree, remains uncertain. The Ministry finds the use of GCD appropriate and acceptable only on special occasions (such as in theatrical and folkloric performances, school events, etc.), and recognizes that the knowledge of GCD can enrich students’ linguistic awareness. However, there has never been any attempt by this authority to re-examine the current language policy, appraise how other dialect-using nations (e.g. Holland, Norway, Luxembourg and Switzerland) deal with such relevant matters and then decide as to whether certain significant changes in policy may be necessary, essential and long overdue.

Now we turn to the present study. As far as it can be ascertained, very few studies, if any, investigated the perceptions native speakers hold about their language before attempts are contemplated by language planners to introduce changes to language policies. Specifically, in this study an attempt will be made to examine the reactions expressed by Greek Cypriot university students about the possibility of introducing the Cypriot dialect as a medium of instruction in primary schools, the perceived effects that such a change in language policy may bring about and whether such changes in policy are deemed to be desirable and acceptable in the bidialectal setting of Cyprus.

5. The study

5.1 Participants

Seventy-seven (77), first- second- and third-year students, 69 female and 8 male, enrolled in the English BA Programme of the University of Cyprus participated in this study during the fall semester 2003/04. All participants were Greek Cypriots, having entered the university on the basis of the national entrance exams, and they all came from middle class families, which is typical for the whole of the student body.

5.2 Material

A questionnaire was designed for the purposes of this study and consisted of four parts. In the first part, participants were asked to respond to six Likert-style general statements regarding the introduction of the Cypriot dialect as a medium of instruction in primary schools. In a like manner, in the second part, participants were asked to indicate the relative difficulty that the Ministry of Education and Culture might encounter in dealing with some practical problems that are likely to arise from such a change in policy. In parts three and four (containing ten statements in each), participants were asked to indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement about the possible negative effects (in part three) and the possible positive effects (in part four) that may arise from the implementation of such a change in policy. In parts three and four, participants were also asked to assess the differential effects that a change in policy may
have by introducing bidialectal (instruction in the dialect and in the standard) rather than dialectal education in Cyprus.

5.3 Procedure

Questionnaires were distributed in class to students of the English programme. Participants were assured about the confidentiality of their responses and were requested to complete and return the questionnaires within a week. 90% of the questionnaires were completed and returned within the allotted period.

6. Results

The responses of the completed questionnaires were tabulated and analyzed statistically and the findings are presented in five separate parts.

6.1 Part I: General views about changes in policy

The first part of the questionnaire elicits information regarding the participants’ opinion about dialectal and bidialectal education, the advantages or disadvantages of possible changes in current language policy, the sufficiency of the dialect for communicative purposes, and whether the standard form of the language (SMG) poses problems to Cypriot children. In terms of the number of participants who are in favor of dialectal or bidialectal education, the obtained results show that only 3% are in favor of dialectal education, 74% are against it and 23% are not sure about the change in policy. Furthermore, 64% are in favor of bidialectal education, 25% are against it and 11% are not sure about the change in policy. Regarding the benefits or disadvantages that the change in policy may bring about, 36% of the participants believe that the change in policy will bring about benefits to the students, 33% do not think so and 31% are not sure. Similarly, 34% of the participants believe that the change in policy will bring about disadvantages to the students, 33% do not think so and 33% are not sure.

In examining the efficiency of GCD, 57% of the participants believe that the Cypriot dialect is sufficient for meeting the communicative needs of Cypriot children, 24% disagree and 19% are not sure. As for the use of SMG in class, 39% believe that the use of SMG poses problems to Cypriot children, 43% do not think so and 18% are not sure.

6.2 Part II: Practical problems in changing the language policy

Part II of the questionnaire examines the relative ease or difficulty of the practical problems that are likely to be encountered by the Ministry of Education in implementing a change in language policy. For statistical purposes, in Part II the responses for “extremely difficult” and “very difficult” are presented as a combined value labeled “difficult” and for “very easy” and “extremely easy” as a combined value labeled “easy”. Furthermore, the practical problems are divided into two separate categories: Table 1 presents the practical problems pertaining to the dialect itself (its written form, grammar, dictionaries, writing new textbooks and rewriting older books) and Table 2 the practical problems related to the people, the Cypriots themselves (the children, parents, general public, teachers, policy makers).
Table 1. Practical problems regarding the dialect

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent of difficulty</th>
<th>Written form</th>
<th>New textbooks</th>
<th>Grammars</th>
<th>Dictionaries</th>
<th>Older Books</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% difficult</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% easy</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Practical problems regarding the people

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent of difficulty</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>General public</th>
<th>Decision makers</th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>School children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% difficult</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% easy</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6.3 Part III: Negative effects in changing the language policy

Part III of the questionnaire examines the participants’ perceptions as to the negative effects that may arise from the implementation of a change in policy. For statistical purposes, again, in Parts III and IV the responses “strongly agree” and “agree” are presented as a combined value labeled “agree” and for “strongly disagree” and “disagree” as a combined value labeled “disagree”. Furthermore, the negative effects (ten in number) are divided into those that would have an effect on the people (their ethnic and cultural identity, national pride, cultural isolation and linguistic impoverishment) and those factors that will have an effect on the use of standard Greek and the relationship of Cyprus with Greece. Table 3 shows the relative degree of agreement or disagreement with five possible negative effects on Cypriots that may arise due to the change in policy, and Table 4 the relative degree of agreement or disagreement with five possible negative effects that the change in policy may create (in such areas as communication, understanding literary works, continuation of studies, conducting businesses and the weakening of the bonds between Cyprus and Greece).

Table 3. Negative effects on people

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent agreement</th>
<th>Ethnic identity</th>
<th>Cultural identity</th>
<th>National pride</th>
<th>Cultural isolation</th>
<th>Linguistic impoverishment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% agree</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% disagree</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Negative effects on the use of the Greek language and the relationship between Cyprus and Greece

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent agreement</th>
<th>Continuation of studies</th>
<th>Communication</th>
<th>Conducting business</th>
<th>Understanding literary works</th>
<th>Weakening of bonds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% agree</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% disagree</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6.4 Part IV: Positive effects in changing the language policy

Part IV of the questionnaire examines the participants’ perceptions as to the positive effects that may arise from the implementation of a change in policy. Table 5 presents the relative degree of agreement or disagreement with ten possible positive effects that the change in policy may produce.

Table 5. Positive effects due to the changes in policy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>% agree</th>
<th>% disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expressing thoughts and feelings</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confusion in choosing ‘appropriate’ words</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity in written and oral reports</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embarrassment about linguistic abilities</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfortable in oral expression</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confident and with elevated self-esteem</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in class participation</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deeper sense of belongingness</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambivalence about ethnic identity</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning the Turkish Cypriot dialect</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6.5 Part V: Comparisons between dialectal vs bidialectal education

Participants were also asked to evaluate the negative and positive effects that would occur in case bidialectal education is introduced (a definition of bidialectal education was provided). That is, whether there would be no more effects (negative and positive), to a greater extent or to a lesser extent than those of introducing dialectal education. The results show that 59% of the participants believe that the negative effects of introducing bidialectal education will be fewer while 30% (half as many) believe that the negative effects will be, to a large extent, about the same if bidialectal education is introduced while 11% do not believe that changes in policy would make any difference. Similarly, the participants’ reactions about the positive effects in case the state introduces bidialectal education show that while 52% believe that, to a large extent, the positive effects will be the same as those of introducing dialectal education, 38% believe that the positive effects will be fewer and 10% do not believe that the changes in policy would make any difference.

7. Discussion

A close examination of the results in Part I shows that the clear majority of participants, that is, 74% (one out of four), are very much against the introduction of the Cypriot dialect in education and another 23% (one out of four) are not sure about it. Only a mere 3% are in favor of such a change in policy. In contrast, the majority of the participants (64%) appear to be in favor of introducing bidialectal education and only 25% (one out of four) are not in favor. Similarly, those who are not sure about dialectal education are twice as many (23%) as those who are not sure about introducing bidialectal education (11%). It is evident that while participants do not accept dialectal education they appear to be in favor of the introduction of bidialectal education in Cypriot state schools. In looking at the benefits or disadvantages that would result from a change in policy, no
differences are found. While 36% see benefits as a result of a change, nearly the same number (34%) see disadvantages.

In investigating some purely linguistic factors that come into play in forming an opinion about matters related to language policy, such as the efficiency of a non-standard code and the imposition of another ‘standard’ code, some interesting findings come into view. While 57% of the participants believe that the Cypriot dialect as a code is sufficient for meeting the communicative needs of Greek Cypriot children, one out of four (24%) do not think so and 19% are not sure. In terms of the use of SMG in class, 43% of the participants do not believe that this poses a problem for children while an almost equal number (39%) believe that the use of SMG does pose problems.

One further aim of the present study was to examine the practical problems that would arise if the Cypriot dialect were introduced in state schools. Ten problems were identified (five regarding the dialect itself and five regarding the people themselves) and participants were asked to indicate the degree of difficulty to be encountered in implementing this change in policy. The results of this analysis are shown in Tables 1 & 2. As it can be seen on Table 1, participants perceive the preparation and writing of new textbooks (for all grade levels) in Cypriot Greek as the most difficult problem to be dealt with (77%), then preparing new grammars (73%), then rewriting older books (66%) and then preparing a written form of the dialect. The last perceived difficulty is the preparation of Cypriot Greek dictionaries (50%). These findings point out the need for the standardization of the dialect. On the other hand, participants believe that MEC will find decision makers, that is the Council of Ministers, as the most difficult body in accepting any changes in language policy (69%), then the general public and parents (50% & 49% respectively), then school children (45%) and finally teachers (33%). If one takes into consideration the ideological implications that a change in language policy may entail at the present time in Cyprus, and the political cost to be reaped by any government, present or future, it is of no surprise that participants rate decision makers as the most difficult to convince about any changes in language policy.

The analysis of the ten possible negative factors, five related to the people themselves and five on the future use of Greek and the relationship between Cyprus and Greece, is presented in Tables 3 & 4. Table 3 shows that participants disagree that the national pride (67%), cultural identity (62%) and ethnic identity (55%) of Greek Cypriots will be affected if the Cypriot dialect is introduced in schools. However, the number of participants who agree or disagree as to whether linguistic impoverishment will result from a change in policy is identical (44%). Similarly, the difference between those who agree (43%) or disagree (31%) that Cypriots will be culturally isolated due to a change in policy is not a very large one. A global evaluation of the results in Tables 3 & 4 indicates that whereas participants are not afraid that their national pride, cultural and ethnic identity will suffer due to a change in policy, they do show concerns about the linguistic impoverishment and cultural isolation that a change in policy may bring about. There is disagreement among participants that communication (52%) or conducting businesses with mainland Greeks (51%) would be hampered. However, they do show concerns about understanding literary works written in SMG (45%), the weakening of the bonds between Cyprus and Greece (44%) and the ability to continue for future studies in Greece (42%). Thus, although communicating and conducting business with mainland Greeks do not appear to be of grave concern among participants, reading books, continuing for further studies and the preservation of ties (political, cultural, etc.) between Cyprus and Greece emerge as mattering the most.

As for the possible positive effects that would be brought about due to changes in policy, participants appear to agree (to varying degrees) with eight out of the ten listed
factors (with the exception of the last two). It appears, from Table 5 that the greatest benefits to be reaped are the comfort that children would feel in expressing themselves orally (87%), in expressing their thoughts and feelings freely (78%), in being less confused in choosing ‘appropriate’ words (72%) between GCD and SMG vocabulary and in feeling less embarrassed about their own linguistic abilities (67%). Similarly, their self-confidence and self-esteem would be elevated (58%), their class participation would increase (52%), their sense of belonging to their own place of birth would be elevated (49%) and their creativity in written and oral reports would be enhanced (47%). As for the ninth factor, that is the effects on Cypriots’ ethnic ambivalence, the difference in the number of participants who agree or disagree (33% vs 26%) is very small, and therefore, no clear conclusions can be drawn. Finally, participants strongly disagree (59% vs 5% who agree) that the change in policy would be an enhancing and a positive factor in learning the Turkish Cypriot dialect. Those familiar with the political situation between the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities living on the island would not be surprised with the outcome of this factor.

8. Concluding remarks

In sum, the following conclusion may be arrived at: while participants do not appear to question the efficiency of the dialect and admit that the use of SMG poses certain problems for children, and, while they acknowledge the numerous beneficial effects that the use of the dialect in class would bring about, they unanimously reject the introduction of the dialect as a medium of instruction. On the contrary, if changes in language-in-education are ever going to be made, participants prefer the introduction of bidialectal education, which they understand to be equal instruction in SMG and in the Greek Cypriot dialect. As can be deduced from the obtained results, one could make the claim that bidialectal education is seen by participants as a way of elevating the status of the dialect, enhancing Cypriot children’s linguistic abilities in both codes (standard and non-standard), enriching their confidence and self-esteem, fostering a deeper sense of belonging to the country in which they live in, appeasing national sensitivities and at the same time preserving the bonds between the island and Greece (in terms of cultural ties, effective communication, businesses and further education).

Participants’ preference for bidialectal education receives further support from a doctoral study that was recently completed (Yiakoumetti 2003). The study revealed that the explicit and conscious comparison of GCD and SMG in class increased language awareness and led to noticeable improvement in students’ linguistic performance in the standard form (SMG). The introduction of bidialectal education can be achieved in many different ways and Hamers & Blanc (1989) offer three types of solutions; compensatory programs, bidialectal programs and eradication of prejudices programs, which are appropriate for different settings and address different educational needs.

As we have seen, an effort was made in this study to examine speakers’ perceptions about possible and theoretical changes in current language policy in Cyprus and whether such perceptions can be an obstacle in implementing or changing language policies. Participants’ reactions, reflections and preferences on the matter were reported and statistically analyzed. It must be realized, however, that such perceptions cannot be evaluated as either right or wrong or be characterized as unrealistic, optimistic or idealistic. They are simply the perceptions of a group of university students who have gone through the state educational system itself, an experience that has shaped their personal views and opinion on the matter. As Judd (1992: 173) indicates, “Claims of objectivity and neutrality in language-in-education issues are impossible to maintain;
rather, such issues necessarily involve subjective perceptions of what is good or bad in and for a particular society”. In spite of any inherent limitations that corpus planning surveys may have, Kaplan (1992) affirms that surveys that capture peoples’ opinions, views and feelings are of paramount importance before any attempts are contemplated by countries wishing to introduce changes in their educational policies. It is hoped that the present study may have some theoretical and practical value when changes in policy are ever sought by education authorities and possibly serve as a springboard for further research in the area of language policy and planning.

References


